AZAZEL: THE SCAPEGOAT IN THE BIBLE AND ANCIENT NEAR EAST

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INTRODUCTION

Kippur (or its variant) is used over one-hundred and eighty times in the Bible and is translated as "atone," "propitiate," or "expiate." The English word "atone" (as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary) best conveys its underlying concept: "being 'at-one' with others; a unity of feeling, harmony, concord, agreement." The primary biblical text on atonement is Leviticus 16, which describes Yom Kippur. This ritual as practiced in Ancient Israel involved a number of actions mainly focusing on the High Priest. These are divided into three parts. First, the High Priest sacrificed a bull as a sin offering on behalf of himself and his household. Blood from this sacrifice was then taken into the Holy of Holies and sprinkled there. Second, a goat for God, selected by lot before the bull offering, was sacrificed. Its blood was also sprinkled in the Holy of Holies, as well as in the outer shrine, and the outer altar.

Third, and perhaps the most interesting, is Azazel. In this ritual, a live goat selected earlier was brought forward and the High Priest with both hands on the head of the goat confessed the wrongdoings of the people. The goat was then escorted into the wilderness. Its actual death was not considered indispensable since, as soon as the goat reached the desert, the High Priest was permitted to continue with the service and was not required to wait until the goat died. In this article we will try to understand the purpose of the unusual ritual of the scapegoat[1] and its parallels in the ancient Near East.

WHAT IS AZAZEL

There is a great deal of confusion regarding the exact meaning of "Azazel". Suggestions for its identification have included an uninhabitable physical location, a foreign deity, or a wilderness-dwelling demon. The interpretation of Azazel as a foreign deity or a demon is typically based on the fact that Azazel is parallel to the LORD in Leviticus 16:8 when the goats are described as *one marked for the LORD and one marked for Azazel*. Ramban provides a lengthy comment on 16:8, in which he elaborates on the identity of Azazel stating that "the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded that on Yom Kippur we dispatch a he-goat into the wilderness to the prince who rules over the areas of destruction .. . . And the intention with respect to the he-goat that is dispatched is not that it be a

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sacrifice from us to him (i.e., Azazel), God forbid, but rather that our intention be to do the will of our Creator who so commanded us."[2]

The Septuagint and subsequently the King James Version translated Azazel as "scapegoat" which is quite suitable for the first half of 16:8 and the first half of 16:10 but not for the second half where it appears to be a place name, *but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the Lord to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel*. Taken as a whole, Azazel has a sense of negativity and desolation.

REMOVAL OF IMPURITY

The Day of Atonement ritual as a whole is designed to remove the accumulated contamination, caused by the impurities and sins of the Israelites, from the tabernacle. This contamination was understood to physically accumulate in the tabernacle, and different types of contamination required different procedures for removal. The scapegoat is part of one such procedure and has a specific function: to remove the contamination caused by the intentional sins of the Israelites from the tabernacle complex by physically carrying it all into the wilderness. With the Azazel ritual, neither repentance (*teshuvah*) nor the word from which it derives, return (*shuv*), are found anywhere in the chapter. Indeed, this root is not used in the Torah in the theological sense of "repent" or "return to God" until Deuteronomy 4:30, *when you are in distress because all these things have befallen you and, in the end, you return to the Lord your God and obey Him*. The confession of the High Priest recorded in Leviticus 16:21 was not an unburdening of the soul as much as it was a vehicle for transferring sin.

As Jacob Milgrom has argued, the first two purification offerings serve to clean up and remove contamination caused by the impurities and unintentional sins of the Israelites; however, their intentional sins cannot be removed in the same way. In fact, it cannot be neutralized at all. Instead, it must be physically relocated to a place far away from the LORD and his tabernacle. This is why the scapegoat exists. The high priest confesses the people's sins while laying two hands on the head of the goat, ritually transferring those sins from the tabernacle to the goat, and then sends that goat out into the wilderness, to an area beyond the bounds of human habitation. In this sense, the two goats can be compared to the two birds used in the purification ritual of the leper, where one of the birds is set free to fly over the field (Lev 14:4–7).

In Mishna *Yoma* chapter 6, the ritual described in Leviticus 16 is supplemented with a directive to drive the goat off of a cliff so that it dies, perhaps reflecting a concern that the sin-laden animal would find its way back into the community if it was allowed to live. The idea that the goat was loaded with the sins of Israel is expressed in Mishnah *Yoma* 6:4 which relates that the Babylonians (or the Alexandrians) used to pluck the hair of the

goat and proclaim "Take and go" which is explained as meaning "why is this goat waiting here when the sins of the generation are many and are upon them."

The goat was not accepted as an ordinary sacrifice to be slaughtered, burnt, or even brought near the Sanctuary; it was removed as far as possible, and sent forth into an uncultivated, uninhabited land. Here the goat represents the entire community becoming symbolically or mystically equivalent to the offerer. In the case of sin and guilt offerings, the plain meaning of the text indicates that one hand is placed on the animal's head before it is slaughtered thereby transferring sins to the animal. This one-handed gesture appears to demonstrate that the animal to be slaughtered belongs to the offerer, signifying that "this is mine" rather than "this is me." In the case of Azazel, the verse clearly states that the ritual is performed with two hands signifying "this is me." The community was able to transfer its sins onto the goat, and the goat, in effect became the sinner.

SCAPEGOATS IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

The idea of a scapegoat existed throughout the ancient world. James Frazer devoted an entire volume of his study of religion and folklore to the subject of the scapegoat[3] noting that other ancient Near Eastern "sending away rituals" involved dispatching an animal carrying abstract evils (impurity, curses, plagues, disease) to an uninhabited place. He was able to document similar practices in diverse societies all over the world, in many periods of human history. After the evils are transferred to that animal its release purifies the territory and the people.

The most ancient example of a sending away ritual was uncovered in the Ebla archives (Tell Mardikh in Modern Syria) from the twenty-fourth century BCE. A tablet describes a ritual in which an animal is sent away in order to purify the house of the dead prior to a royal wedding: "We purify the mausoleum before the entrance of (the Gods) Kura and Barama. A goat, a silver bracelet (hanging from) its neck, towards the steppe of Alini we let it go."[4]

A Hittite rite for purifying the king and queen ("The Ritual of Šamuha"), recorded in the latter half of the second millennium BCE states: "[The exorcist] releases [one bull] for [the king], but one cow, ewe, and nanny goat [fo]r the queen's implements—[all] as a nakušši ("sent-away") …. Whatever evil word, false oath, curse, (or) [im]purity has been committed in the sight of the deity—may these nakuššis [c]arry them [off] from before the deity. May the deity and the ritual patron (=king and queen) be purified of these things!"[5]

A Hittite ritual from the same age and site describes how the exorcist sends a mouse that is tied with a red thread, previously bound upon the "patrons" (i.e., the patients), into an uninhabited region, with the statement, "I have taken the [e]vil from you. I have bound it around the mouse. May [th]is [mo]use carry it to the high mountains, to the deepest

valle[ys], to the long roads."[6] This ritual has several significant connections with the Israelite scapegoat ritual. First, it notes specifically that the mouse is to be sent into an uninhabited region, just as the biblical scapegoat is to be sent to "inaccessible region." The mouse is said to be an offering for the minor gods Zarniza or Tarpattašši, reminiscent of the biblical description of the wilderness area dedicated to Azazel, which according to the plain meaning of the biblical text in Leviticus 16:8 can be viewed as a counterpart to God.[7] Second, this rite includes the tying of a thread around the sent away animal and a pronouncement over it. This thread is associated here with the evil whose transfer to the mouse effects the removal of the evil.[8] While this custom is absent in the Bible, it is a part of the Mishnaic scapegoat ritual in *Yoma* 4:2.

In the latter half of the second millennium BCE, Ugarit apparently had the same practice of sending away an animal when a danger threatens the city and its citizens: "If a city is captured (or) if the people die, (all) the people shall take a goat and lead it far off."[9] A ritual recorded on a Neo-Assyrian tablet describes how a frog is brought to a sick person, who must then pronounce the following words three times: "Frog, you know the 'grain'-disease which seized me, [but I do not know it]. Frog, [you know] the li'bu-disease which seized me, [but I do not know it]. When you (try to) hop off and return to your waters, you will return [the evil to] its steppe."[10]

These and other examples parallel the meaning of the sent away animals in both the biblical leprosy and in the biblical scapegoat rituals. When the animals are sent out into the uninhabited wilderness, the impurities go along with them, no longer able to harm people. The scapegoat ritual, though seemingly unusual in the Bible, was widespread in the ancient world.

POST TEMPLE CHANGES

The Torah does not mention any prayers which accompanied the sacrifices, but liturgical additions were made during the Second Temple period which included petitions, blessings, and readings from the Bible. With the destruction of the Second Temple and the cessation of the sacrificial system, prayer and repentance became the focus and the Temple ritual was recounted as part of the Yom Kippur liturgy. The liturgy now fully replaced sacrifices, *our lips compensate for bulls* (Hosea 13:3). By virtue of the entire community's prayers and fasting, the day of Yom Kippur itself takes the place of the Temple sacrifices and has the power to expiate sins and provide a proverbial "clean slate."

Yom Kippur no longer contains any echo of the transference of sin associated with Azazel. The focus is now on personal and communal repentance. As Philo observed, "not only those devoted to piety, but even those who are not distinguished at all on other days by the fear of heaven, fear the sanctity of the Day and observe it, evildoers standing together with the good in the struggle to subdue the evil inclination."[11]

NOTES

1. The word "scapegoat" is a modern interpretation of the perplexing phrase "a goat for Azazel". Early Greek translations of the Bible rendered it as "the one sent off," and the Latin Vulgate translation called it the "emissary goat." It was not until the Tyndale English Bible was published in 1530 that the translation "escape-goat," later shortened to the familiar "scapegoat" in the seventeenth century King James Version, was introduced.

2. Levine, B. *The JPS Commentary: Leviticus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989).

3. Frazer, J. *The Golden Bough*, vol. 3 (Macmillan, 1900), pp. 1–134.

4. Zatelli, Ida. "The Origin of the Biblical Scapegoat Ritual: The Evidence of Two Eblaite Texts." *Vestus Testamentum* 48 (1998), pp. 254–263.

5. Lebrun, Rene. *Samuha, foyer religieux de l'empire hittite*, Publications de l'Institut orientaliste de Louvain 11 (1976), pp. 125, 132.

6. Christiansen, Birgit. *Die Ritual tradition der Ambazzi: eine philologische Bearbeitung und entstehungsgeschichtliche Analyse der Ritual Texte*, CTH 391, CTH 429 und CTH 463, SBT 48.

7. See, e.g., ibn Ezra for Lev 16: 8 and 17: 7.

8. Wright, David P. *The Disposal of Impurity: Elimination Rites in the Bible and in Hittite and Mesopotamian Literature* (Scholars Press, 1987), p. 58

9. Dietrich, Manfred and Loretz, Oswald. *Mantik in Ugarit: Keilaphabetische Texte der Opferschau, Omensammlungen, Nekromantie* (Ugarit Verlag, 1990), pp. 32–38.

10. Scurlock, JoAnn, *Animals in Ancient Mesopotamian Religion*. "Animals in Ancient Mesopotamian Religion," in *A History of the Animal World in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Billie Jean Collins (Brill, 2002), p. 373; "Translating Transfers in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World,* ed. Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki (Brill, 2002), p. 211.

11. Philo, Spec. 1:186–8; 2:193–203; Mos. 2:23–24.